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## The Third Voice

 OC

This was inspired by a writing prompt on [r/humansarespaceorcs](#) which I have lost, because I'm as slow as ever at writing. Just a short one from [u/eruwenn](#) and I.

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The young woman sat quietly in the testing room, the only sound the rhythmic drumming of her fingertips on the steel table before her. Her calm exterior was a façade to hide the fear that was tightening its grip on her stomach. No matter how many times the medical team had assured her this was perfectly safe, being the first human to have their telepathy unlocked was no small thing.

A voice filled the room, soft-spoken and friendly, "I am Osta Filden of the Quelfi, and I have been selected to guide you through your awakening. It is a great honour to accompany the first link to the Terrans."

She nodded, too nervous to talk, looking first to the circular speaker on the roof above her, then the large mirror on one wall before her eyes finally came to rest on the closed door in front of her. Sitting tall and proud in her seat, representing her whole species at this moment and determined to do it with dignity, she waited for the speaker to continue.

"Do your best to relax, as we are in this together. I am a little nervous," Osta admitted, "as this is an intimidating task. First contact is a rare occurrence, one that hasn't happened for several generations of my people. Do you have any questions before we begin, Trierarch Watson?"

The human appreciated their attempt to ease the tension, and let her shoulders relax. Finally, she spoke. "You can call me Michelle. And the medical team has gone over everything to come at least a hundred times — the military *loves* repetition." She let out a nervous chuckle, then gave in to her curiosity. "Are you sure this will even work? I mean, surely you can't unlock telepathy for every species. How would that even work? And why?"

"There are many discussions on this subject." The soothing voice sounded pleased that she was finally engaging with it. "These vary from a uniting gift from some form of deity, to a legacy that indicates a progenitor or ancient architect race of some kind. Long ago wars were fought over this, but no longer."

Michelle realised none of this was in her briefing. "Why not?"

"Fundamentally, the ideas are compatible," Osta answered. "Whether it was a deity or a guiding ancestor, the goal was to give us a way to communicate. Something to unite us across the barriers of the physical world. To war over this gift would be futile, and so instead we united, exploring the universe together. Every new species we awaken brings us all closer to the truth. Now, it is time to add the human piece to our puzzle."

"Sounds good." She nodded as she spoke, the movement brushing aside her apprehension. "Let's get started, I'm ready."

"We have already begun," the Quelfi replied. "Tell me where you are? What do you see around you?"

"I'm in the test room, waiting for you," Michelle began to say, and was about to brush off the idea of things having already been set in motion when she released that she had no memory of arriving in the room. "You mean... we've started?"

"Yes." Osta's voice maintained its reassuring warmth. "It took a little longer than expected to connect us, but you are lying in the medical room with your team monitoring you closely. Proximity is vital for beginners, so I am in the bed next to yours. Like you, my people watching over me. We are both safe, and if either of us show any signs of distress they will end our session."

"Distress?" She was certain they had said this was perfectly safe. "What sort of distress?"

"The Awakening, as a process, is different for each species." The guide paused for a moment, considering her earlier words. "It seems your mind has created a controlled environment; a room for the test. The first step for most species is a feeling of disembodiment. They might find themselves lost in a brilliant light, or within an all-consuming darkness. Understandably, this can cause anxiety, fear and panic. That you have remained in control, and adapted, is most promising."

"Thank you." Michelle readily accepted what the voice described, glad that she was performing well for her people. "So, what's next?"

"If you are in a room, then there is a door," Osta reasoned. "Symbolic acts are important in this space. When you open the door, it will be the extending of an invitation, and I will be able to enter."

"Ah, yeah, that makes sense." She stood, suddenly aware of her body and how real it felt, and ran her hands through her short brown hair. "Couldn't have imagined away the buzzcut?" she chuckled to herself, more nervous than actually amused.

The trierarch stepped around the table, walking past the empty seat that had been opposite her own towards the closed entrance. There was a heavy bolt action lock sealing the door, and she couldn't be certain whether it had always been there or had just recently appeared. The metal was cold beneath her fingers, making her hesitate before slowly lifting it. She quickly made use of both hands in the action — it was much heavier than it appeared to be.

"*Stop*," a sibilant voice whispered from directly behind her. The words were barely audible, but startlingly close.

Michelle released the bolt. As it clattered into place once more she spun around, her heart pounding. "Who said that?"

"Are you alright, Trierarch Watson?" Osta asked. "Are you having difficulty with the door?"

"Yeah... I mean, no." The trierarch looked around the empty room, reminding herself that she was alone. "There's a lock, and it's heavy."

"It seems the human mind is quite a literal thing," the Quelfi replied. "A room for a test, a door to enter, and a lock that requires effort to release. Please continue."

"Uh huh." She turned back to the lock, unsure if having a literal mind was a compliment, or an insult. With both hands on the bolt she lifted it, and it only seemed to grow heavier in her grasp. Her progress slowed.

"*Stop.*"

The whisper caused her to jump once more, and Michelle pressed her back against the door. "Who is that?" she asked as she scanned the room. "Is someone watching me?" she asked out loud, staring at the only other object in sight: the large mirror.

"Are you alright, Trierarch Watson?" There was genuine concern in Osta's voice. "Who are you speaking to?"

"Nobody," she replied instinctively. The medical team had been quite clear that this first test would be just the two of them. Multiple connections were dangerous, even for a more advanced telepath. "I thought I heard someone. Must be my imagination."

"Indeed." For the first time, the guide sounded uncertain. "Please open the door, I can offer more assistance once we are connected."

"We're not connected now?" Michelle replied. "Like, we're talking to each other, aren't we? Isn't this telepathy?"

"This is only a beginning. It requires a lot of effort on my part, and we are still not *connected*." The Quelfi had lost some of the soothing notes in their voice. "I can not see you. We can not *truly* interact. The state we are trying to achieve has no terran equivalent."

The trierarch knew her duty. She was a leader, a soldier, and would not be bested by her imagination. "Third time's the charm," she announced, turning to confidently grip the bolt. With a single action she lifted it and slid it aside, then reached down for the door handle.

"*Foolish child,*" the hissing whisper snarled at her. "*Stop. Now.*"

With one hand on the door handle Michelle turned to the room, daring the speaker to show themselves. On the opposite wall was a second door, and she froze in shock. It was made of utter shadow, and for the first time she realised how bright the white test room was. Had the door always been there? She couldn't recall, and she couldn't look away. It felt unnatural, with shafts of swirling darkness creeping into the room from its edges.

"Please, open the door," Osta asked again.

"*Step away,*" the whisper commanded. "*Remember my lessons.*"

Michelle let out a long slow breath, taking her hand from the door handle. Her heart was beating faster and she fought to slow it.

"Who are you?"

"Trierarch Watson, is everything alright? Who are you talking to?" The Quelfi's voice held open concern.

"Can't you hear it?" she called out. "It's coming from the second door."

"Second..." Osta stopped speaking, the pause extending for far longer than the human was comfortable with. "There should only be one door."

"I thought you said it was different for everyone," Michelle replied. "So, I have a second door, and another voice. Is that bad?"

"Nothing is *bad*." The hastiness of the placating response was only matched by its insincerity. "I have no knowledge of what is inside that room until we make the connection. Open the door so I can investigate further."

"*Some things are bad, you know this.*" The voice beyond the door seemed to be growing stronger. "*I taught you this.*"

"You taught me?" Michelle looked down at the door handle. One turn, and Osta would come to her aid. Yet she didn't reach for it. Curiosity and pride took her one step away, and she spoke directly to the shadowy door. "Who are you? What lessons?"

"Do not engage with this voice. Please, open the door so that I may assist you." Osta sounded almost fearful now.

"*I gave you everything\**,"\* the third voice was calm, still sibilant, but now tinged with anger. "*Trust in my gifts.*"

Michelle folded her arms across her chest. Raising her chin, she stared down the shadows. "Gifts? Lessons? Who, or *what*, are you?"

"*No divine being led you from the dark places, protected you from danger, and revealed your greatness.*" As the voice spoke, the shadows from the door slowly grew, reaching further into the room. "*You created gods, and demons, gave them a thousand*

*names, and forms, to hide from the truth. But, it was always **me** who was with you."*

Michelle took a step back towards the door that led to Osta. Her hand reached for the handle. She was afraid, but her determination was unwavering. "Give me a straight answer."

*"See, even now you are my child," the shadows hissed. "You already know me. I am humanity's companion as they journey into the unknown. I protect you, not with a loving hand but with harsh lessons and cruel reality. I know my children, and this is what fuels you. Even now, you stand defiantly in the face of fear."*

"I found the door," Osta called out. "Please, open it. There is no handle on this side; I can not come in unless you invite me."

The shadowy tendrils now reached out from the borders of the door to the walls and floor surrounding it, covering almost a full third of this mental test space. The young woman stared into the growing darkness. Terror had focused her mind on every syllable spoken, and she lowered her hand from the door behind her. "Harsh lessons?"

*"I inspire those who are to bring my lessons to others," the voice said in a reverential hush. "Some write tales, stories of possibilities, monsters real and imagined. Lock your doors, watch over your young, do not devour the unclean — all are lessons I bring. But I made my children wilful, strong, and fierce. I warn you, and yet you press on, seeking me out to try to tame me. Others are inspired to act in a way that reinforces my lessons, to show that the darkness is within you all. I am carried with all my children, at times forgotten, but inescapable."*

"Trierarch Watson, I need you to open this door. Do not listen to the third voice." The Quelfi's voice no longer came from all around, but from the door behind her.

Michelle stood her ground. She knew what she was supposed to do, yet something held her back. Before her eyes, the darkness continued to spread, and when it reached the mirror on the wall to her right it shattered. Sharp pieces of glass fell to the floor, revealing stonework reminiscent of the ancient castles of Earth behind where the pane had once been. "This wasn't part of the briefing. They're right, I shouldn't be listening to you."

"The door, please!" Osta cried out desperately.

*"Many of my children do not heed me. It is your curse, and your gift." The third voice was no longer a whisper now, having grown strong and confident. "Those who took torches into the dark places, who sailed into the unknown, know me best. My children who face their enemies head on, standing tall in the face of adversity, who befriend the beasts around them. You, who stand here on the precipice of a new frontier, know me. You carry me, and despite my lessons you still move forward."*

The young woman raised her hand and gestured at the door behind her. "The Quelfi, and all of their allies, are peaceful. They gifted us technology, and advanced our scientific knowledge hundreds of years."

"Michelle." Osta's voice was gentle once again, coming from just beyond the door. "Please, I am begging you. Open the door."

*"They came bearing gifts,"* the shadows countered. *"I warned you of this."*

Michelle shook her head in an effort to clear it. "Stop." She took a deep breath. "I know who you are, and like you said, sometimes we have to ignore you. To discover new lands, *or whatever*. Opening this door? It's like exploring a new system. I need to open it and see what's on the other side. I can't let you stop me."

"The door!" Osta demanded. "Let me in!"

*"They can not enter, unless invited,"* the darkness answered\*. "I warned you of them."\*

Only the wall behind her, and Osta's door, remained. The shadows had consumed everything else. Michelle turned to face the handle, gritting her teeth and grasping it. "I won't be ruled by fear."

*"Fear the stranger. Fear the dark. Fear the odious and unclean. My first lessons."* Through the darkness of the shadows that closed around her, Michelle could barely still make out the door on the other side of the room. Something wasn't right, but her vision was too obscured to make it out. *"Fear of failure. Fear of death. Fear of what you are capable of. This is the leash that holds you in check, my beautiful children. I am always there, pushing you onwards and holding down the weak. For those who overcome me, I promise great — and terrible — things. My defeat is a trial for all to face, yet you do not appreciate my grand gift. I am your teacher. Your guardian. Your motivator. Humanity is my creation."*

"Thank you for the lessons," Michelle said determinedly, "but, I guess my fear is regret." She opened the door, embracing the unknown and preparing herself for whatever may come. The darkness surged past her, and an unseen Osta cried out in terror.

Suddenly she was awake in the medical room. She could still hear Osta screaming, and as her team frantically untangled the sensors that still littered her body she turned to see the red-skinned alien writhing and lashing about in their medical pod. The poor fellow Quelfi did their best to restrain the four flailing arms.

"Trierarch Watson, are you alright?" A dark-haired woman was leaning over her, shining light into her pupils. "Michelle, you good?"

"What's happening?" the test subject asked, unable to keep the fear from her voice. "Doctor?"

"I don't know. We just started a few seconds ago," the woman replied. "Once they joined the two pods, the stress markers just went off the charts." Osta's screaming was suddenly cut short and the doctor looked away, listening in on the other team. "Oh, fuck."

Michelle sat up, pushing aside the remaining grogginess from the attempted telepathic link. When she looked over to where the Quelfi were working, they were gathered closely around their comrade. "What's happening?" she asked, though given Osta's contorted body she already knew the answer. The aliens were talking hurriedly, clearly extremely shaken by their deceased patient, and as one they turned to look at her. Their eyes slowly took in all the other humans in the room, then they began to back away, clustering together.

"They're leaving?"

*"It has begun,"* the third voice whispered in her mind. *"My children carry me with them to the stars, and together we shall teach them my lessons."*

Michelle's eyes widened as realisation finally struck her. The shadowy second door in her mind had been bare. There had been no sign of a lock, or handle, on her side.